Flight 007: The Rest of the Story

I Told the World the Soviets Shot It Down in Cold Blood, But I Was Wrong

By Alvin A. Snyder

AS THE director of worldwide television for the U.S. Information Agency, I was summoned to a secret meeting at the State Department over the Labor Day weekend 13 years ago to discuss a TV production. Entering a small conference room through a heavy metal door with a combination lock at its center, I was given an audio tape. I was instructed to produce a video document based on the contents of the tape that would be shown two days later at the U.N. Security Council.

Korean Airlines Flight 007, with its 269 passengers and crew, had strayed off course over a Soviet missile installation in the far Pacific and was shot out of the sky by Maj. Gennady Osipovich, in his Sukhoi-15 fighter. Minute by minute, top secret American intelligence stations near the Soviet border had monitored Osipovich's pursuit of Flight 007 as it cruised on the last leg of its journey to Seoul, and its destruction at 2:26 p.m. Washington time, Aug. 31, 1983. Working with other producers, we fashioned a slick video which was played at the Security Council Sept. 6, and beamed around the world by satellite—marking something of a new era of government-to-people diplomacy.

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The video was powerful, effective and wrong.

American government media gurus have come a long way since they dispatched pro-American films by dogsled to Lapplanders in isolated Norwegian communities in the early 1950s. Skilled technicians of today's multiplying forms of information make it easier to reach, and bamboozle, the public instantly. But government information managers are not usually to blame. They can only communicate what they are told by their superiors. Frequently it is what they are not told that is the problem.

Consider the KAL 007 episode. It was the first time video was used as evidence in a Security Council proceeding. Our video was based on comments of the Soviet fighter pilots talking to their controllers as they stalked the plane. Using text in Russian and an English translation, along with a chronology and map of the route, the tape supported the contention that the Soviets wantonly shot down what they knew to be a passenger plane. They fired no warning shots nor gave any signal for the plane to land. The video became a key factor in what Secretary of State George Shultz promised in a memo to President Reagan would be a massive public relations effort "to exploit the incident."

The intent was to link the incident to nuclear disarmament issues. Raising concerns about Soviet integrity could do serious damage to the Kremlin's peace campaign to dissuade NATO allies in Europe from placing upgraded American nuclear weapons on their soil. We were not aware at the time that the State Department was also telling President Reagan that the pilots of the Soviet interceptors were confused as to the identity of the plane, according to a recently declassified memo from Shultz to Reagan which was released through the Freedom of Information Act.

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Shultz had been told by briefers from the Central Intelligence Agency and the National Security Agency that the Soviets might have thought they were shooting down a U.S. spy plane. According to his memoirs, Shultz dismissed the notion, telling briefers their theory was implausible, and reporting to his staff that intelligence agencies "have no compunction about fooling you."

Shultz went public with the hard line.

State Department official Richard Burt told reporters in a background briefing that the Soviets knew it was a passenger plane. Undersecretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger said the downing of the airliner raises "the most serious questions about the competence of the Soviet air defense system, with all the danger that implies."

In the Security Council chamber we placed one of our TV monitors near the Soviet U.N. ambassador, Oleg Troyanovsky, so that he and the monitor would be photographed together as our tape played. The U.S. ambassador to the U.N., Jeane Kirkpatrick, introduced the tape. "Perhaps the most shocking fact learned from the transcript," she said, "is that at no point did the pilots raise the question of the identity of the target aircraft."

The crowd in the standing-room-only chamber hushed and watched intently as the horror unfolded. The restrained voices of the Soviet pilots could be heard above the heavy static as they narrated the final terrible moments of Flight 007, including pilot Osipovich's words, "The target is destroyed." The Soviet ambassador refused to turn around to look at the monitor directly behind him and stared defiantly ahead, looking in every way the perfect heavy—a jowly, arrogant, unapologetic Soviet bureaucrat.

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But within the last few years, additional taped evidence has become public that makes clear that I was given only selective information—some of the pilots' words and none of the comments of the ground controllers. Those full conversations reveal that the Russians believed the intruder aircraft was an American RC-135 reconnaissance plane, many of which flew routine missions in the area. The tapes, which are compiled in the final report of the International Civil Aviation Organization's investigation of the incident released in 1993 told me what I did not hear.

The tapes, the content of which U.S. government officials were aware of at the time of the shootdown, show that Osipovich could not identify the plane, and that he fired warning cannons and tipped his wings, an international signal to force the plane to land. All this failed to get the crew's attention. The controller said, "The target is military. As soon as it has violated state borders, destroy it. Arm your weapons . . . . The target has violated the state border. Destroy the target."

Former U.S. officials involved in the coverup, who insist on anonymity, have told me that monitoring data was intentionally withheld from our U.N. tape. Beyond the propaganda value, the U.S. did not wish to tip the Soviets to the sophistication of its intelligence along the Soviet border. "Although untrue and unfair," one former State Department official told me, "it intimidated the Russians, and probably helped to prevent future such incidents and saved lives. We gave them a beating."

Flight 007 was a victim of the Cold War, and it proved that war could be very real and could lead to human casualties. Another casualty, always war's first, was the truth. Anything that worked was fair game. The story of Flight 007 will be remembered pretty much the way we told it in 1983, not the way it really happened. Technology may well spawn disinformation more insidious than any we have yet known. What replaces 1980s-style disinformation in the future may make it seem wholesome by comparison, and the press must be ever more vigilant.